

Engaging Closed-Mindedly with Your Polluted Media Feed

Heather Battaly

Heather.battaly@uconn.edu

ALAMSHAH LECTURE SEPT 2021

THE SET UP: Rewind to June 2020. Most of your interactions are on-line due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and protests against systemic racism are occurring in cities across the United States. Imagine that racist claims about crime, and fake news about COVID-19, appear in your social media feeds. You know the claims in question are false, and you care about truth. **Polluted Feed.**

THE QUESTION: What should you do? Should you do nothing, or should you engage in some way? If you should engage, with what or whom should you engage? Should you engage with the posts and the people who made them, or with someone or something else? Moreover, how should you engage? Should you engage with an open mind or a closed one?

THE CONCLUSION: We should engage closed-mindedly. Specifically, we should:

--dismiss and report false posts,

--advocate for structural reform of content algorithms,

--flood the epistemic environment with truths and critical thinking.

--be alive to opportunities where closed-minded engagement with people who believe the posts can produce good epistemic effects overall.

We should engage c-mindedly—what does that mean?

IT MEANS:

1. EPISTEMICALLY, we should engage closed-mindedly. What we should do EPISTEMICALLY will sometimes conflict w/what we should do MORALLY, or POLITICALLY.

2. Why **should** we engage closed-mindedly? Because an epistemically **virtuous** person in Polluted Feed would engage closed-mindedly.

3. Who are the epistemically virtuous people? What is an **epistemic virtue**? BIG QUESTION!

--Here, I am restricting epistemic virtues to **EFFECTS-VIRTUES**.

--**DISPOSITIONS TO PRODUCE MOSTLY GOOD EPISTEMIC EFFECTS, SUCH AS TRUE BELIEFS AND KNOWLEDGE.**

--Virtue-Consequentialist view. (Big picture: I am a pluralist about virtues—some are MOTIVES-VIRTUES, some are EFFECTS-VIRTUES. Here, I focus on the latter.)

IN OTHER WORDS.....

4. SUMMARY: In Polluted Feed, engaging closed-mindedly is likely to produce better epistemic effects than engaging open-mindedly or doing nothing.

5. AN UPSHOT: engaging closed-mindedly isn't always vicious—sometimes it is virtuous.

DEFINING CLOSED-MINDEDNESS....

AN EXAMPLE: **Closed-minded Clint.** Suppose Clint grew up believing that poverty is caused by laziness. He has stuck with this belief throughout his life, is unwilling to revise it, and unwilling to engage seriously with any ideas or evidence to the contrary. He dismisses competing ideas and arguments that cross his path without evaluating their merits. When the conversation turns to low wages as a cause of poverty, Clint rejects it. When he sees an article arguing that lack of opportunity contributes to poverty, he thinks it ridiculous, and may even leave a comment to that effect, before scrolling on. He recognizes that such ideas compete with his own, and rejects them because they strike him as implausible. He is closed-minded, at least about this topic.

DEFINITION: **Closed-mindedness** is an unwillingness (or inability) to engage seriously with relevant intellectual options—e.g., competing ideas and evidence—and or an unwillingness to revise a belief.

Dogmatism is one kind of Closed-mindedness.

Dogmatism is an unwillingness to engage seriously with relevant alternatives to a belief one already holds or (in cases where one is willing to engage seriously with alternatives) an unwillingness to revise a belief one already holds.

FORMS OF CM: Closed-mindedness and dogmatism can take the form of:

- domain-specific dispositions. Only CM about 1 topic. OR
- general dispositions. CM about most or all topics. OR
- individual actions. Closed-minded actions.** (Important for Polluted Feed) Generally Open-minded, but dismiss a claim on a particular occasion.

So.....

- CLINT:**
1. is CLOSED-MINDED AND DOGMATIC about the causes of poverty.
 2. Has (at least) domain-specific CM and DOG.
 3. Performs multiple closed-minded and dogmatic actions.
 4. His CM and DOG is epistemically vicious—produces more bad epistemic effects than good ones.
- his CM and DOG obstructs knowledge, protects/strengthens false beliefs about causes of poverty, etc.
- in Clint, CM and DOG are effects-vices.

HOW IS THE DEFINITION OF CM CONNECTED TO POLLUTED FEED?

CONCLUSION: In Polluted Feed, we perform closed-minded actions of dismissing posts we know to be false. I'm arguing that unlike Clint, when we do this, we aren't being epistemically vicious. There are situations, e.g. Polluted Feed, in which CM actions are epistemically virtuous—they produce good epistemic effects, or at least produce better epistemic effects than the alternatives.

SET-UP: Imagine that racist claims about crime, and fake news about COVID-19, appear in your social media feeds. You know the claims in question are false, and you care about truth.

OPTIONS: What should you do? Should you...

- A. Engage seriously with the posts and be willing to revise your beliefs? Or,
- B. Engage seriously with the posts but be unwilling to revise your beliefs? Or,
- C. Engage dismissively with the posts and be unwilling to revise your beliefs? Or,
- D. Avoid engaging with the posts, and be unwilling to revise your beliefs, but engage with other aspects of the epistemic environment in an effort to counteract the posts? Or,
- E. Do nothing?

EXPLANATIONS: **Option C** is CM. It involves:
--dismissing the posts (not seriously engaging), e.g., commenting that they are false or with a debunking link, calling them out as racist, etc. And
--Being unwilling to revise beliefs that conflict with the posts—unwilling to re-open those inquiries, e.g., that we shouldn't drink bleach to cure C-19.

Option D is CM wrt the posts. It involves:
--being unwilling to engage with the posts at all and
--Being unwilling to revise beliefs that conflict with the posts
--engaging with other people or structures to try to counteract the posts, e.g., reporting the posts to FB or Twitter, increasing one's own posts about systemic racism or C-19, helping others learn critical thinking (!), advocating for changes to content algorithms

Option A is Open-minded. It involves:
--engaging seriously with the posts and
--Being willing to revise beliefs that conflict with the posts/re-open those inquiries.
--OM requires both of these pieces—the rare conspiracy theorist who engages seriously w/you (b/c they want to change *your* mind), and isn't willing to revise their beliefs, is CM, not OM.

Option B is CM. Why?
--even though it involves engaging seriously with the posts,
--it still involves being unwilling to revise beliefs that conflict with the posts.
--e.g. Daryl Davis engages seriously with arguments of Klan members, but is unwilling to revise his belief that white supremacy is false/re-open inquiry. He isn't engaging to figure out what is true—he already knows white supremacy is false! He is engaging to change their minds. (see Ornstein)

MCINTYRE:
Agree!

AGAINST E/DOING NOTHING RESULTS IN BAD EFFECTS.

--When fake news outperforms real news, some people end up with false beliefs that, e.g., climate change isn't anthropogenic, vaccines don't work, etc.

--even when we don't acquire false beliefs, doubt can erode beliefs, resulting in loss of knowledge.

--normalization of fake news can have bad effects on the broader epistemic environment: undermine the value of truth, erode trust, and make it hard to identify experts.

--bad epistemic effects can produce bad moral effects.

Agree!

AGAINST A/OM ENGAGING RESULTS IN BAD EFFECTS.

--OM engaging w, e.g., climate deniers, flat earthers wastes time and resources better spent on pursuing other inquiries.

--platforming: confers credibility on 'crackpot' theories, sows public confusion/doubt, makes it difficult to identify experts.

--OM engagement involves re-opening inquiry, reducing confidence in belief that (e.g.) earth is round. Risk losing knowledge. (Fantl)

Close but
Not Quite!

FOR C/CM DISMISSING. LIMITS BAD EFFECTS.

--dismissing the posts is a 'pre-bunker': prevents people encountering them for 1st time from believing them.

--doesn't change minds of people who already believe them.

Close but
Not Quite!

FOR D/CM COUNTERACTING. LIMITS BAD EFFECTS.

--flood environment with truths: good for everyone

--flood environment with education about fallacies, CT,

identifying reliable sources: good for people not yet exposed.

Caution!

FOR B/CM SERIOUSLY ENGAGING. LIMITS BAD EFFECTS.

--seriously engaging with people who believe fake news helps us understand why, so we can help them change their minds.

--we need to change minds to prevent bad moral effects.

THE VIEW:

In Polluted Feed, we should pursue C and D, and with extreme caution, B. Why?

FOR C, BUT NOT C ALONE.

--we should CM dismiss false posts because this can prevent false beliefs from forming IN THE SHORT TERM

--can prevent people encountering them for the first time from believing them.

--BUT we should be wary of the LONG TERM effects of C.

Dismissing the posts can produce LONG TERM HARM b/c of

--dissociation of content from source: we can remember the content of a fake news story without remembering that our source was a debunking website. (Begg)

--repetition and fluency effects: familiarity with a claim, via memory, increases our fluency in processing it, which can make us more likely to believe it! Short story:

Debunking can facilitate false beliefs over time (Levy)

--even when repetition of a false claim doesn't result in a false belief, it can impact cognition through priming.

Repetition of false claims about, e.g., race and crime can slow processing of positive claims about people of color.

**TO MITIGATE C'S LONG TERM
BAD EFFECTS, WE SHOULD
COMBINE C WITH D.**

FOR D.

--flooding the environment with truths and CT education can't help to change the minds of people who already believe fake news, if it doesn't reach them.

--to reach them, we need structural changes to content algorithms; need to break down echo chambers (Nguyen).

--use structural mechanisms to reduce bad effects: report fake posts (Rini).

THE VIEW:

FOR B WITH EXTREME CAUTION.

- For serious engagement, that demonstrates caring about truth, caring about helping others learn, in contexts where we are likely to help others learn/change their minds.
- but do this w/extreme caution and only in contexts where we are likely to help others learn because seriously engaging:
 - can waste time and resources.
 - can confer credibility on 'crackpot' theories, deniers, racists, make it difficult to identify experts.
 - can sow public confusion/doubt, spread false beliefs.

FINALLY!

WE SHOULD ENGAGE CLOSED-MINDEDLY IN POLLUTED FEED.

As a group, we should:

- divide our epistemic labor amongst D and C, and where effective B.
- dismiss and report false and misleading posts
- advocate for structural reform
- pour truths and critical thinking into the environment.
- be alive to opportunities where B will be effective in changing minds.

What should **you** do Polluted Feed?

- depends on features of the context and your role in group
- there may be contexts in which you should pursue B instead of D and C.
- No individual can solve the problem on their own, and even a group working together won't make much progress without structural reform.

THANK YOU CSUF! WHAT DO YOU THINK?

References

- Battaly, H. 2018a. "Closed-mindedness and Dogmatism." *Episteme* 15(3) 2018: 261-282.
- Battaly, H. 2018b. "Can Closed-mindedness be an Intellectual Virtue?" *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 84: 23-45.
- Begg, I. M., and A. Anas and S. Farinacci. 1992. "Dissociation of Processes in Belief: Source Recollection, Statement Familiarity, and the illusion of Truth." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 121(4): 446-458.
- Fantl, J. 2018. *The Limitations of the Open Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Intemann, K. and I. de Melo-Martin. 2014. "Are there Limits to Scientists' Obligations to Seek and Engage Dissenters?" *Synthese* 191: 2751-2765.
- Levy, N. 2017. "The Bad News about Fake News." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6(8): 20-36.
- McIntyre, L. 2020. "Science Denial, Polarisation, and Arrogance." In A. Tanesini and M.P. Lynch (eds.) *Polarisation, Arrogance, and Dogmatism*. London: Routledge.
- McIntyre, L. 2019. *The Scientific Attitude*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- McIntyre, L. 2018. *Post-Truth*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Nguyen, C.T. 2020. "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles." *Episteme* 17(2): 141-161.
- Ornstein, M. (Director) 2016. *Accidental Courtesy*. Sound and Vision.
- Rini, R. 2017. "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology." *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 27(2): E43-E64.